

# Bringing Climate Action ‘Down Under’: The Politics of Climate Change in Australia

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Often thought of as a leader on environmental issues, in recent years, Australia has dropped to the back of the pack. Nowhere is this more obvious than in its handling of climate change. In July 2014, Australia became the world's first developed nation to take a backwards step on climate change, repealing laws that put a price on carbon dioxide emissions. The push to repeal the so-called “carbon tax” was led by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, an outspoken opponent of climate action, who once publicly declared that “the climate change argument is absolute crap.” This week, Abbott was replaced by a more moderate Prime Minister, raising hopes of a shift in Australia’s climate policies.

On Monday night, Australia’s center-right Liberal Party voted to remove Prime Minister Tony Abbott and appoint Malcolm Turnbull in his place. Under the Westminster parliamentary system followed in Australia, a majority of elected officials must support the Prime Minister. Where the Prime Minister loses such support, a new leader may be appointed by elected officials, without the need for a general election. While such leadership changes were historically rare, in recent years, they have become increasingly common. In fact, over the last eight years, not a single leader has served a full term.

Politicians often say that these leadership changes will not impact the direction of government since policy is set by the party as a whole. In reality, however, the party leader is in a unique position to set the policy agenda. It is, therefore, not uncommon for issues that had previously been pushed aside to take center stage under a new leader. Many environmentalists hope that this will be the case with climate change.

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott was a vocal opponent of action to mitigate climate change. This is despite the fact that, as the driest inhabited continent on earth, Australia has much to lose from a warming climate. Already common occurrences, including severe droughts and devastating wildfires, are expected to become more severe and frequent in coming years. As President Obama [stated](#), during a visit to Australia in 2014, “[h]ere in the Asia Pacific, nobody has more at stake when it comes to thinking about and then acting on climate change. Here, a climate that increases in temperature will mean more extreme and frequent storms, more flooding, rising seas...[I]t means longer droughts, [and] more wildfires.” The President’s dire predictions were not, however, enough to convince Australians to reduce emissions of climate-damaging greenhouse gases.

Australia has one of the highest rates of per-capita greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. This is primarily due to the country’s heavy reliance on coal to meet its electricity needs. Whereas the [U.S. and other countries](#) have reduced electricity generation from coal in recent years, in Australia, coal-fired generating units continue to account for over two-thirds of total generation. The continued use of coal was supported by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who last year called for an end to the “demonization of coal,” stating that the fossil fuel is “[good for humanity](#).”

Consistent with this positive view, the Abbott government has been a strong supporter of coal development. Last year, the government [approved](#) a new mine in central Queensland which would have been the largest ever built, capable of producing 2.3 billion

metric tons of coal over 60 years. (Approval of the mine was subsequently set aside by the Federal Court. The court ruled that, in approving the mine, environment minister Greg Hunt had not adequately considered his own department’s advice about the impact on two threatened species. The court therefore remanded the decision back to the minister for reconsideration.)

At the same time as supporting fossil fuels, under Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the Australian government has opposed further development of renewable energy sources. Earlier this year, Abbott made headlines when he described wind turbines as “[visually awful](#).” Another senior government minister, Joe Hockey, recently said he finds wind farms “[utterly offensive](#).” It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that the government has directed the [Clean Energy Finance Corporation](#) – a statutory body established to fund renewable energy and energy efficiency programs – not to invest in wind farms.

The Abbot government’s strong support for coal, and opposition to renewables, left it with few options for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Last year, the government established a “[direct action plan](#)” which provides grants to companies or organizations that volunteer to reduce emissions. Notably however, unlike the U.S. which has mandated emissions reductions in certain sectors (e.g., from power plants), no such mandates have been adopted in Australia.

In the lead-up to negotiations for a new global climate deal, Australia proposed a modest [goal](#) of reducing emissions by 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. While this may sound comparable to the U.S. [target](#) – which requires a 26 to 28 percent cut in emissions by 2025 – it is actually far lower. Australia is proposing to take ten years to achieve what the U.S. will do in five. Assuming the U.S. continues to reduce emissions for another five years, it could achieve an emissions reduction of 41 percent by 2030, well above the Australian target.

Environmentalists are hopeful that, with the appointment of Malcolm Turnbull as Prime Minister, Australia will strengthen its commitment to climate action. Turnbull has previously advocated strong action on climate change, supporting the introduction of an emissions trading scheme, or another market-based solution to address carbon emissions. Nevertheless, at a press conference following his appointment as Prime Minister, Turnbull expressed his support for the existing climate policy. He did, however, acknowledge that “[p]olicies are reviewed and adapted all the time.” Just what, if any, changes will be made to the climate policy remains to be seen.

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